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AUTHOR Barsi, Louis M.; Kaebnick, Gweneth W.
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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of innovation within the university is examined, noting the possibility of innovation as a key to college vitality. A study was conducted using a group of institutions that demonstrated recent innovative spirit. Members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), each has been recognized in an annual award process started by AASCU in the name of G. Theodore Mitau, a creative educator from Minnesota. Their programs represent major programmatic or organizational change. The directors of about 40 innovative programs recognized in the Mitau award program were interviewed. They were asked about how the innovation began, who prompted it, what kind of climate encouraged successful innovation, and what suggestions they had for interested colleagues. Those who achieved success say the key lies in understanding human nature. They note the importance of things like creating an atmosphere that invites contributions, including everyone in the planning process, and defining the project's goals as broadly as possible. Innovation does not have to be limited to wealthy institutions, and many innovators note innovation need not be expensive. They have succeeded because of the creative and encouraging environment they developed which actively rewards experimentation and because they realize many people are comfortable with the status-quo and will object no matter how good the proposal. Ultimately, success depends on an institution's attitude toward change. (SM)

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Innovative Universities

by Louis M. Barsi and Gweneth W. Kaebnick

Listen to its critics and you'd believe that American education totters on the brink of disaster. Its colleges in particular are portrayed as a moribund set of interests lacking intellectual rigor and integrity. Perhaps some schools and colleges invite the criticism. But the larger truth is that many more are performing well, fulfilling their missions, and serving their constituencies effectively.

It's relatively easy, in fact, to find colleges and universities that are creative and in good health. No two of them, on inspection, are exactly alike; each has its own mission and constituency. So what is it that these institutions have in common that allows them to excel?

It isn't the size of their endowments, or their prestige. It is their ability to imagine a better future, to exercise their creativity in meeting changing needs. It is their ability to *innovate*.

Given the introspection of the day, we thought it would be useful to examine the phenomenon of innovation, particularly as a possible key to campus vitality. As our subjects, we focused on a group of institutions that have demonstrated innovative spirit over the past decade.

These institutions are partners in the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Each has been recognized in an annual award process established by AASCU in the name of the late G. Theodore Mitau, an eminent, creative educator from Minnesota. The programs so honored represent major programmatic or organizational changes, that is, innovation in the full sense, not tinkering or mere modification of procedure.

We interviewed the directors of some forty programs recognized over the last ten years in the "G. Theodore Mitau Award for Innovation and Change in Higher Education" program, which is now in its final year. We asked them, how did innovation begin? Who prompted it? What kind of climate encourages successful innovation? What suggestions do you have for colleagues interested in innovation?

From these conversations, we came to see that innovation is possible on virtually any campus.

Why does innovation begin?

A number of factors lead organizations to innovate. The most frequently cited reasons were "service oriented or altruistic." Campus parties identified or had brought to their attention an unmet need; the "service" mission of their institutions set a climate for response.

Financial considerations also influence innovation. In a decade of increasing costs and shrinking budgets, organizations are compelled to operate as efficiently as possible. A theme frequently repeated by creative institutions is that innovation does not have to be expensive. Creating new programs or implementing new procedures can, in fact, result in reduced costs.

A third factor that spurs innovation is a desire to remedy some perceived shortcoming of students, such as academic underpreparation or what was described as "student provincialism." Some institutions also cited the need to develop new programs to serve a potential pool of applicants.

Declining enrollment, a personal or institutional research interest, and the administration's desire to regain control in a particular academic area were also cited as factors prompting innovation.

A climate for innovation

While many institutions are compelled to innovate for external reasons, some campuses seem systematically to encourage creative thinking and experimentation. Long-lasting change appears to occur in campus environments that encourage creative thinking and that, indeed, accept outcomes that elsewhere would be regarded as failures.

Such a campus environment exists at the University of Wisconsin, Stout. Awarded a Special Commendation in 1987, the Centers for Enhancement of Education, a network of nine campus centers, blend community service with professional-growth opportunities for faculty and hands-on client contact for students in the education departments.

Nelva Runnals, dean for academic development, told us that the environment at Stout fosters the creation of successful innovation. Says Runnals, "Experimentation is woven into the fabric of Stout. Because of its proven record of success, Stout can afford to experiment. It isn't regarded as 'strange' here.

"Change is a gradual process; it takes time; it requires skill and patience. Moreover, you can't force change on people. You gently lead them into it," she asserts.

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Another 1987 Special Commendation recipient, Richard Jacobs of California State Polytechnic, agrees. Says Jacobs, "Profound change cannot be ordered in an edict. It must stem from a sense of mission." Jacobs is the program director for the university's Interdisciplinary General Education Program (IGE), which exposes students, primarily those in technical fields, to the complex array of questions presented in the humanities and liberal arts. IGE, a sequence of courses approaching human culture from the perspective of the humanities, social sciences, and the arts, helps students understand the impact of technology on the environment and the human condition.

A few key decision makers in an institution's hierarchy who are broad minded, who see the inherent value of experimentation, and who see the "total picture" are crucial to successful innovation. In addition, one or two people who have a personal investment in the cause, who see it as their responsibility to carry the project through, are worth more than a dozen moderately committed people with good intentions.

Most important, whoever leads the movement for change must be dedicated, committed, and able to articulate a vision of a brighter future. The climate that breeds innovation *is* uncommon; the process that successful innovation requires can be time-consuming and perilous.

What do successful innovators suggest?

Successful innovators are eager to share their insights, and failures, with others. When it comes to initiating a new and potentially controversial program, they recommend strategies useful at the outset:

- Identify a need, then design a program or service of reasonable scope to fill it. Set modest and realistic goals to begin with.
- Document your plans thoroughly, with references to pertinent literature. Check with other institutions to determine whether someone else has already done the groundwork.
- Have a clear vision of the project's direction; be prepared to clarify potential problems before top administrators and others who will be affected by them.
- Draw, if possible, from constituencies who will benefit from the proposed change when recruiting staff. You'll get workers who are dedicated, enthusiastic, and unselfish. Orient and train them thoroughly.

If the institution fears innovation, success will be much more difficult, if not impossible, to attain.

On a broader level:

- Be familiar with institutional procedures and legal ramifications relevant to the proposed change.
- Form an open planning committee and encourage people to join. The more people who get involved, the greater the movement's staying power. However, be sure just a few people are accountable for seeing the project through to completion.
- Determine costs realistically and devise ways to make the project self-sufficient. People are more receptive to a new idea that doesn't involve reallocations from their budgets.
- Pay attention to details, no matter how boring they may be. There are no short cuts to quality.

Once you're off and running:

- Establish and implement a formal evaluation plan.
- Provide for backup leadership in the event the "prime mover" leaves.
- Enlist the support of the off-campus community whenever possible. Community volunteers are a usually underused source of assistance and enthusiasm.
- Strive to have the college or university institutionalize the project.

The psychological dimension

Much of what distinguishes successful innovative ventures from failed ones lies in subtleties. Lesson one, say veteran innovators, is learning to mobilize support. How is momentum built? Is there a way to keep enthusiasm from waning during periods of stress?

Those who have achieved success say the key lies in understanding human nature.

- Define the project's goals as broadly as possible; allow as many people as possible to feel ownership of the project. Large numbers of supporters will tend to create a bandwagon effect.
- Don't exclude anyone from the planning process, even if they have no apparent relationship to the proposed program. People who feel alienated will be more likely to oppose a plan, regardless of its merits.
- Create an atmosphere that invites contributions, where everyone involved feels like a key player. The more people who feel at least partially responsible for the idea, the more likely it will be that the movement will gain momentum.
- Be able to take intrinsic satisfaction from your work. Extrinsic rewards may be a long time in coming.

Financing change

Innovation does not have to be limited to "wealthy" institutions. A theme successful innovators frequently repeated is that innovation need not be expensive; "lack of funding" is often an excuse for those who fear innovation.

The Alternate Education Program, begun at Cleveland State University (CSU) and now housed at Cuyahoga Community College, is a good example. This low-cost community outreach program serving juvenile offenders, the elderly, and the university's education students was started by the

Louis M. Barsi and Gweneth W. Kaebnick are program associates, Academic Programs, at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, One Dupont Circle, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036-1192.

university's College of Education as an experimental project. It paired volunteers in CSU's Senior Citizen Tutorial Program with juvenile offenders for one-on-one instruction and guidance.

The project was so successful that the Ohio Department of Youth Services asked the university to institute a full-time program along the same lines and offered to fund it. CSU faculty provided volunteer training; in return they had use of a field placement site for education, psychology, and social services students.

Successful innovation

When we began our survey of Mitau Award winners, we set out to answer the question, why have these institutions succeeded? We think we have the beginnings of an answer.

- They've created an environment that actively encourages and rewards experimentation.
- They've developed creative work environments in which not getting something new "just right" the first time is considered the first step toward success, not a failure.

Ten Years of G. Theodore Mitau Award Winners

1988: California State University-Chico
Community Action Volunteers in Education (CAVE)

CAVE is a cocurricular learning, nonprofit agency located on the campus of California State University at Chico. Through CAVE, 1,500 to 2,000 student volunteers serve more than 10,000 children, elderly, and low-income residents in the Chico area and the Napa and Sonoma Valleys each year through eighteen different programs. *Contact:* Janet Richmond, Director, CAVE, California State University-Chico, W. Second and Cherry Sts., Chico, CA 95929-0750, (916) 895-5871.

1987: State Colleges of West Virginia
Consortium for Faculty and Course Development in International Studies (FACDIS)

FACDIS, a consortium of more than 250 foreign language and social science faculty, brings international studies to more than 6,000 students at West Virginia institutions of higher education. FACDIS assists the faculty in developing international studies courses, distributes instructional materials, and increases study abroad opportunities for students. *Contact:* Sophia Peterson, Director, FACDIS Program, Department of Political Science, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506, (304) 293-7140.

1987: University of North Carolina at Charlotte
University City

University City is an economic development project contributing to the campus endowment, enhancing the campus environment, and protecting the city and state tax bases. It includes the University, a research park of ten blue chip firms, a mixed-use development, the University Memorial Hospital and Medical Office complex, a business incubator center, and residential areas. *Contact:* James W. Clay, Professor of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223, (704) 547-4249.

1986: George Mason University
Plan for Alternative General Education (PAGE)

PAGE is an alternative program of freshman- and sophomore-year interdisciplinary courses meeting general-education requirements in communication, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics, and non-Western culture. Summer workshops train faculty to teach interdisciplinary, interactive classes; faculty teams refine courses and share teaching strategies. *Contact:* Terry Comito, Professor and Director, PAGE Program, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr., Fairfax, VA 22030, (703) 323-2044.

1986: Bowling Green State University
Arts Unlimited

Arts Unlimited is a cooperative effort designed to encourage elementary and secondary schools to develop long-range systematic study of the arts in a rural, small-town environment. Participants coordinate artistic resources to achieve educational change in the schools, while at the same time profiting from the opportunity to teach in diverse environments. *Contact:* Michael A. Moore, Director, Arts Unlimited, Bowling Green State University, 300 McFall Center, Bowling Green, OH 43403-0200, (419) 372-8181.

1985: Towson State University
Teacher-Research Institute of the Maryland Writing Project

The Teacher-Research Institute of the Maryland Writing Project involves language arts teachers at the primary through university levels in conducting research in their own classrooms in order to improve instruction. The project promises a creative approach to developing linkages between secondary and postsecondary institutions and to stimulating research at various educational levels. *Contact:* Gloria Neubert, Director, Teacher-Research Institute, Towson State University, College of Education, Towson, MD 21204-7097, (301) 321-2425.

1984: Wright State University
International Student Exchange Program

Wright State University's International Student Exchange Program immerses students in the daily life of countries at the four corners of the globe, at no cost to the participating institutions. Through exchange agreements with universities abroad, Wright State offers students four weeks of life and study in a non-Western nation. *Contact:* Elenore Koch, Vice President for Student Affairs, Wright State

• They've realized that many people are comfortable with the status quo. They realize that regardless of the merits of a proposal, someone will object, but such objections do not deter them.

Successful programs rarely result from a single effort. The successful innovators we spoke with advise that "failure" should not be feared; rather, it should be accepted as one of the steps on the road to success. This is not to suggest that innovation is impossible without failure; rather, administration, faculty, and staff must be at least comfortable with its possibility.

Ultimately, success depends on an institution's *attitude* toward change. If the institution fears innovation, success will be much more difficult, if not impossible, to attain.

Through our conversations with successful innovators, we have reaffirmed that although true innovation is uncommon, it need not be. We hope that someday the kind of colleges and universities recognized by the G. Theodore Mitau Award Program will be the norm, not the exception. ■

University, Dayton, OH 45435, (513) 873-2808.

1983: Metropolitan State University
A University for Adults

Metropolitan State University, the "University for Adults," is a university-without-walls featuring individualized, competence-based, student-designed programs combining liberal learning with professional education. Courses emphasize creative learning strategies such as assessment of experiential learning, independent study, internships, and integration of community-based resources. *Contact:* Leah S. Harvey; Dean for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Metropolitan State University; Suite 121, Metro Square; 121 Seventh Pl. East; St. Paul, MN 55101; (612) 296-3875.

1983: Northeast Missouri State University
A Value-Added Model of Assessment

The Value-Added Model of Assessment measures the institution's impact on student development and the comparative strength of graduates vis-a-vis other students in the country. Computerized student assessment data are used for improving student and faculty performance, developing programs, and initiating and evaluating change. *Contact:* Charles McClain, President, Northeast Missouri State University, Kirksville, MO 63501, (816) 785-4100.

1983: Cleveland State University
Cleveland Alternative Education Program

The Cleveland Alternative Education Program, begun at Cleveland State University as a comprehensive school program for eighty of Cleveland's most serious juvenile offenders and an after-school tutorial program for approximately a hundred youths recommended by the courts, is now housed at Cuyahoga Community College. Certified teachers and university faculty in conjunction with ninety university-trained senior citizen volunteers delivered the program, in which each student received an individualized education program based on a comprehensive assessment of his or her needs. *Contact:* Lillian Hinds, Associate Professor of Special Instructional Programs, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH 44115, (216) 523-7102.

1982: Southwest Texas State University
Center for the Study of Basic Skills

The Center for the Study of Basic Skills, a cooperative interdepartmental effort, is dedicated to the improvement of basic skills education through the identification of successful teaching practices. Its mission is based on the understanding that teachers and their attitudes play a crucial role in improving the quality of learning. *Contact:* William M. Bechtol, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, School of Education, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX 78666, (512) 245-2042.

1981: Georgia State University
Georgia Career Information System

The Georgia Career Information System is a statewide, computer-based system assisting adults as well as high school and college students with the sequential range of career decision making: identifying aptitudes, learning occupational categories and their market outlooks, and choosing the postsecondary education that offers appropriate education and training. *Contact:* Les Janis, Director, Georgia Career Information System, Georgia State University, Box 1028 University Plaza, Atlanta, GA 30303-3038, (404) 651-3100.

1980: Central Connecticut State College
Modes of Thought in General Education Program

Modes of Thought in General Education is a curriculum designed to improve general-education skills among undergraduates by broadening the base of general education, by increasing the number of required courses exposing students to the fundamental areas of human thought, and by redressing deficiencies in communication and reasoning skills. *Contact:* Paul Beeching, Associate Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, Central Connecticut State College, New Britain, CT 06050, (203) 827-7283.

1979: State University College at Brockport
Delta College (formerly Alternate College)

Delta College, a time-shortened degree option allowing students to obtain a baccalaureate degree in three years, comprises a restructuring of the general-education approach. The College, which also offers academic advisement and counseling through a mentor-tutorial seminar, has increased access for students, improved the curriculum, and catalyzed change in the remainder of the institution. *Contact:* Thomas Bonner, Dean of the Division of General Education, State University College at Brockport, Brockport, NY 14420, (716) 395-2291.